DOE NEWS

MEDIA CONTACT:
Colleen French, (509) 373-5985

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Agencies Sign First-Ever Record of Decision for Disposition of a Processing Canyon

The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), with concurrence by the State of Washington Department of Ecology (Ecology), have signed a landmark Record of Decision (ROD) that lays out how the U Plant Canyon at the Hanford Site in Washington State will be dispositioned.

“This decision is particularly significant because U Plant is the first canyon facility in the DOE complex to have a cleanup pathway,” said James Rispoli, DOE Assistant Secretary for Environmental Management. “We’ll be watching the work at Hanford and using the lessons learned to inform our decisions on the other canyons across the country.”

U Plant is one of five massive processing facilities at the Hanford Site. The building stretches 800 feet long, 70 feet wide, and 80 feet high – with more than 30 feet underground. Its reinforced concrete walls and floor range from three to nine feet thick. Built during World War II to extract plutonium from fuel rods irradiated in Hanford’s production reactors, it was used for training and equipment work and later converted to recover uranium from waste generated at the other canyon facilities.

The agencies evaluated five cleanup alternatives in the Final Feasibility Study, ranging from removing the building entirely to using the structure for disposing of radioactive waste from other cleanup activities at Hanford. The selected remedy was chosen after a collaborative process that included multiple public involvement opportunities, technical studies, and discussion among the parties.

“We overcame a number of challenges in this process,” said Nicholas Ceto, EPA's Hanford Program Manager. "Ultimately, we arrived at a remedy compliant with regulations, protective of

human health and the environment, and that makes sense from a technical implementation standpoint."

Based on the decision, cleanup actions under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act (CERCLA) Record of Decision will include:

- Removing transuranic waste and disposing of it at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in New Mexico;

- disposing of some equipment and piping at the onsite Environmental Restoration Disposal Facility or other appropriate facilities;

- consolidating contaminated equipment on the canyon deck into the below-grade cells;

- grouting the internal vessel spaces, cells, gallery, and other areas in the facility;

- removing the facility's roof and wall sections; and

- constructing an engineered barrier over the remnants of the canyon building and planting vegetation on it to enhance the barrier's ability to wick away moisture from the cap, thus preventing it from pushing contaminants down toward the groundwater.

"This is a common sense approach that is strongly protective of human health and the environment," said Keith A. Klein, Manager of the DOE Richland Operations Office. "The facility's robust construction is an excellent shield for the environment and provides long-term protection that's at least as good as Hanford's lined onsite disposal facility. In addition, not digging up the facility's sub-surface eliminates the substantial risk to Hanford workers who would have been exposed to radiological and chemical contamination."

The ROD also calls for long-term "institutional controls" to ensure the barrier is not disturbed, environmental monitoring, and a review of the protectiveness of the barrier every five years or more frequently as deemed necessary by the EPA.

EPA and Ecology will be joint lead regulators on the project.

"We are pleased that the planning phase of this project is near completion and we look forward to seeing the work begin," said Jay Manning, Director of Ecology.

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